



MIDDLEBURY
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P R E S E N T S



Doric String Quartet
Jonathan Biss, Piano



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2021
7:30 PM · ROBISON HALL
MAHANEY ARTS CENTER, MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE



DORIC STRING QUARTET

Alex Redington, violin

Ying Xue, violin

Hélène Clément, viola

John Myerscough, cello

with guest artist

JONATHAN BISS, piano

Program

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

Allegro con brio

Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato

Scherzo; Allegro molto

Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770–1827)

String Quartet No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, Sz. 85

Prima parte: Moderato

Seconda parte: Allegro

Recapitulazione de la prima parte: Moderato

Coda: Allegro molto

Béla Bartók

(1881–1945)

Intermission

Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

Moderato

Adagio

Andante – allegro

Edward Elgar

(1857–1934)

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Program Notes

BEETHOVEN Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

Allegro con brio

Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato

Scherzo; Allegro molto

Allegro

The F major Quartet, published as No 1, underwent a comprehensive revision by which it became in many ways the strongest work of the set. Beethoven sent its first version to his friend Carl Amenda, but two years later wrote to him “Don’t let anyone see your quartet as I have greatly changed it, as only now do I know how to write quartets properly.” It was a root-and-branch revision, a magnificent lesson in composition to any student (both versions can be found together in Section VI, Volume 3 of the Beethoven Edition published by Henle). The result was a work of considerable power in which the composer showed not only his mastery of structural subtlety but also a new grasp of quartet texture. Such lessons are evident in every moment.

The first movement is one of the most succinct and muscular statements in early Beethoven, and the first figure generates a remarkable range of growth. The directness and simplicity of its beginning did not come all at once; the sketches show that it had to be hammered out, and the way its terseness serves to make room for later expansion foreshadows the extraordinary achievement of Op 95. Notice how the little turning figure in the first theme is soon overlaid by a new counterpoint and then, as the music moves to the dominant, the second group floats and expands (with gentle syncopations) in a way we might not have supposed possible in a piece with so crisp a start. In the revision the development was drastically altered in its range of modulation and the perfection of its part-writing – of all the Opus 18 Quartets, this shows most democracy between the instruments.

Beethoven told Amenda that when composing the slow movement he had *Romeo and Juliet* in mind. He more than once responded to the promptings of Shakespeare but, as with the “Pastoral” Symphony, would have insisted that the result was “more an expression of feeling than painting.” This passionate D minor movement has something in common with the “Largo e mesto” of the piano sonata in D, Op. 10, No. 3. Both spaciouly express a sense of tragedy beyond the ken of any of Beethoven’s predecessors except Gluck, and the Quartet movement has a new refinement of sound, partly due to the way in which the composer removed many of the more vehement markings of the first version. The fining down of the dynamics makes all the more striking the intense outburst towards the end.

After this the Scherzo, far from being the usual release of energy after the restraints of a slow movement, is almost soothing. This is another sign of maturity – a quality we must never

underestimate in Beethoven's early masterpieces. Too often his Opus 18 Quartets are patronizingly treated as the promising products of a student of genius, and we must not forget that already Beethoven is active in a territory unpredictable even by Haydn and Mozart. When these works were first heard the impression was of disconcerting but dazzling mastery of novel ideas. By the time this F major Quartet appeared, audiences were prepared for a fiercely aggressive Beethoven scherzo, so the quiet nature of this one provided a new kind of surprise, not contradicted by the abrupt humor of the humorously modulating Trio with its skipping octaves. In this Scherzo there is, as Basil Lam says, an element of "unrest that links it with the first half of the Quartet" – but it is also an easement towards the rondo Finale.

When he revised it, Beethoven changed the marking for the Finale from "Allegretto" to "Allegro." This means that he first thought of a not excessive speed, but may have felt that "Allegretto" suggested too slow a pace. The "Allegro" marking does not really mean "very fast" (we have to remember that the literal meaning of the word is cheerful or lively, not quick), and there is great risk to the detail if the piece is rushed; its rhythmic vitality is the stronger for not being hurried. The quicksilver first subject is contrasted with singing elements that give the piece great spaciousness, and in this respect it balances the first movement. The development shows Beethoven's already great mastery of polyphony, a skill for which he has not always been given the credit. To the academics, smoothness used to be the only acceptable attribute of good counterpoint.

– Notes by Robert Simpson © 1990, courtesy Hyperion Records

BARTÓK String Quartet No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, Sz. 85

Prima parte: Moderato

Seconda parte: Allegro

Recapitulazione de la prima parte: Moderato

Coda: Allegro molto

Bartók composed his third quartet in 1927, during a period in which he found both inspiration and validation from the international musical community that had been so disrupted during World War I. This piece won a prize from the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia and was soon thereafter premiered by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet in the Wigmore Hall in London, followed just two days later by the Vienna Quartet in Frankfurt in an International Society of Contemporary Music concert.

The shortest of the composer's six string quartets, the work is divided unconventionally: Two sections, designated "prima parte" and "seconda parte," are followed by a "Ricapitulazione [recapitulation] della prima parte" and a coda that in effect is a recapitulation of the second

part. This form, the result of several years' experimentation, allowed both contrast and elaboration as well as a framework within which Bartók could wring a great deal of music out of a small amount of melodic material. As Theodor Adorno wrote in 1929: "What is decisive is the formative power of the work; the iron concentration, the wholly original tectonics." The string writing features a wide range of coloristic effects: glissando, pizzicato, mutes, tapping the strings with the bow, bowing near the fingerboard or the bridge, and strumming.

The lyrical *prima parte* begins with a solo violin passage over moody accompaniment introducing the raw material of the movement – not so much a true theme as what musicologist János S. Kárpáti calls a "primordial figure." Less contrapuntal than much of Bartók's previous quartet writing, the movement features tight two-part or chordal textures as it elaborates the material. The *moderato* leads without break into the *seconda parte*, a folkdance-inspired *allegro*. Here Bartók's unconventional techniques infuse the music with a savage quality. The combination of the furious tempo and the intense concentration of the material has the odd effect of a simultaneous acceleration and slowing-down – a musical analogy, perhaps, to Einstein's theory of relativity, in which mass increases with speed to the point where further acceleration is impossible. The recapitulations of both parts exaggerate their contrasting atmospheres.

– Note by Susan Key, courtesy L. A. Philharmonic

ELGAR Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

Moderato

Adagio

Andante – allegro

After a couple of years during which Edward Elgar's health – mental and physical – had been precarious, he finally regained creative inspiration in 1918. The Piano Quintet in A minor was one of a trilogy of chamber works (the others being the Violin Sonata and String Quartet) conceived – along with the Cello Concerto – in the rural seclusion of Brinkwells, a cottage in West Sussex near Fittleworth, which the composer rented from the artist Rex Vicat Cole. Alice, Lady Elgar, was delighted by her husband's new-found motivation to compose, and by the sound of his latest pieces, noting in her diary: "E. writing wonderful new music, different from anything else of his...wood magic, so elusive and delicate." Elgar started work on the Piano Quintet in September 1918, as soon as he had completed the Violin Sonata. He worked on it intermittently while also finishing the String Quartet throughout the autumn. The finale of the quartet was dated December 23, 1918, and Elgar continued to revise and refine the Piano Quintet until April 1919.

The piano part opens with a theme that seems to be a quotation from the first four notes of the plainchant *Salve regina* (solemn tone) – the notes A, G, A, D – here marked to be played quietly and “*serioso*.” As well as appearing again in the first movement (including a haunting recollection in the coda), this motif, simple and austere, has an important part in the musical argument of the whole quintet: it also returns in the quiet central section of the third movement. Whether it was a deliberate allusion to the famous Catholic antiphon is unclear, though as a Roman Catholic, Elgar would have known this chant well. At the start of the quintet, this theme is set against nervous, uneasy string phrases. Lady Elgar wrote about this passage in her diary:

“Wonderful weird beginning – same atmosphere as Owls [the choral song, Op. 53, No. 4], evidently reminiscence of sinister trees & impression of Flexham Park... sad ‘dispossessed’ trees & their dance & unstilled regret for their evil fate – or rather curse.”

Evidence from the published score suggests that the “sinister trees” Elgar had in mind were in nearby Bedham Copse: the end of the first movement is dated “Bedham, 1918.” A tangle of local legends (including stories about an ancient community of monks who may or may not have been Spanish) gets us no closer to understanding Elgar’s expressive intentions here. As Michael Kennedy suggests, Elgar’s friend Algernon Blackwood – a fine teller of spooky tales – may well have fired his imagination during a walk they took together in the woods in Bedham on July 18, 1918. Later, Alice Elgar suggested a different literary association for the quintet: Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s supernatural novel *A Strange Story* (1862). Ernest Newman, to whom Elgar dedicated the quintet, wrote in 1931 about a “quasi-programme that lies at the base of the work,” but exactly what this was remains a typically Elgarian mystery. Despite a profusion of contrasting thematic material – including a second subject that was characterized by Elgar’s friend W H Reed as “Spanish, Moorish, or possibly Oriental” – this broadly conceived sonata-form movement has an undertone of restless anxiety. As Reed put it in his article for Cobbett’s *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, published in 1929, “With alternations and elaborations of these moods, this remarkable movement proceeds through the development and recapitulation sections, until it ends in rather a gloomy manner, leaving the listener with an uncanny feeling of awe.”

The slow movement, in E major, opens with strings alone, the hushed main theme on the viola. With the entry of the piano a few bars later, the theme is restated in the first violin and the music then seems to evolve in a natural, highly expressive flow of ideas, described in Reed’s commentary as encapsulating “all the higher ideas of which humanity is capable. It expresses them so truly and sincerely, and goes so much farther into the hidden meaning of things than can any mere words, that it seems to be a message from another world.” The finale is in A major, but it begins with an ambiguous, questioning idea which punctuates much of what follows, before the first main idea – a swaying triple-time theme marked “*con dignità*” – is

subsequently developed and extended until a climactic restatement marked “nobilmente.” The second theme is a syncopated, chordal idea introduced by the piano before being taken up by the whole ensemble and leading to a passage in which the music is increasingly animated, and with a rhythmic character that has distinct echoes of Brahms. A more tranquil central section follows in which the opening *Salve regina* theme makes a return, this time transformed by a warm, steady chordal accompaniment, very different from the agitated string motif against which it was first heard at the start of the quintet. Both main ideas are used to drive this finale to its close, with the syncopated second theme presented “grandioso” in a fine peroration before a final explosion of energy brings this work to a powerful close.

Elgar arranged a private performance of the first movement at his London home (Severn House in Hampstead) on January 7, 1919, and others followed, including a play-through of the whole work on March 7. The composer had invited Ernest Newman to this performance, to hear the new work that was dedicated to him, but Newman was unable to be there. But George Bernard Shaw was, and he wrote to Elgar the next day: “The Quintet knocked me over at once. I said to myself, with the old critic’s habit of making phrases for publication, that this was the finest thing of its kind since [Beethoven’s] *Coriolan*. I don’t know why I associated the two, but I did: there was the same quality – the same vein. Of course, you went your own way presently.” Shaw also praised Elgar’s own playing of the piano part which “didn’t sound like a piano or anything else in the world, but quite beautiful ... a touch which is peculiar to yourself, and which struck me the first time I ever heard you larking about with a piano.” The first public performance was given six weeks later, at Wigmore Hall on May 21, 1919. On that occasion it was played by the pianist William Murdoch with a quartet comprising Albert Sammons and W. H. Reed (violins), Raymond Jeremy (viola), and Felix Salmond (cello) in a concert that also included the premiere of the *String Quartet*, and the second public performance of the *Violin Sonata* (played by Sammons and Murdoch) – an early opportunity for the London public to hear all of Elgar’s chamber music inspired by his time at Brinkwells in 1918.

– Note by Nigel Simeone © 2020, Courtesy Hyperion Records

Artist Biographies

Doric String Quartet

Alex Redington, violin

Ying Xue, violin

Hélène Clément, viola

John Myerscough, cello

“Doric String Quartet led a spellbinding series of concerts, rich in variety, impeccable in execution.”

— *The Guardian*



Firmly established as one of the leading quartets of its generation, the Doric String Quartet receives enthusiastic responses from audiences and critics across the globe. With repertoire ranging from Haydn through to Bartok, Ades and Brett Dean, the Quartet’s schedule takes them to the leading concert halls around the world including Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, Berlin Konzerthaus, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Louvre, Carnegie Hall, and Kioi Hall Tokyo as well as regular performances at Wigmore Hall.

A recent highlight of the Quartet’s programming has been Brett Dean’s String Quartet No. 3, written specifically for the Quartet. Given its world premiere in June 2019, “Hidden Agendas” was co-commissioned for the Doric by the Berlin Konzerthaus, Carnegie Hall, Amsterdam String Quartet Biennale, Edinburgh International Festival, Musica Viva Australia, and the West Cork Chamber Music Festival.

Forthcoming highlights include returns to Wigmore Hall, Festspiele Mecklenburg Vorpommern and Esterházy Kaštel. The Quartet returns to North America in collaboration with pianist Jonathan Biss, performing in Philadelphia, Albany, Montreal, Dallas, Athens, GA and Middlebury, Vermont.

With a curiosity for repertoire and setting, the Quartet was delighted to take on John Adams’ *Absolute Jest* for String Quartet and Orchestra. The Quartet was invited to give the Austrian premiere at the Vienna Konzerthaus with John Adams conducting, the Dutch premiere with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic at the Concertgebouw under Markus Stenz, and performed the piece with the BBC Scottish Symphony and BBC Symphony Orchestras. Their recording of the piece with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Peter Oundjian, released on Chandos in 2018, was named Recording of the Month in *BBC Music Magazine* and praised for the “sumptuous sweetness and laser-like clarity” of its performance.

Alongside main season concerts the Quartet has a busy festival schedule and has performed at the Schwarzenberg Schubertiade, Grafenegg, Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schwetzingen, Edinburgh, Aldeburgh, West Cork, Cheltenham, Delft, and Risør Festivals, collaborating with artists including Ian Bostridge, Mark Padmore, Alexander Melnikov, Pieter Wispelwey, Jonathan Biss, Chen Halevi, Elizabeth Leonskaja, Benjamin Grosvenor, Alina Ibragimova, and Cédric Tiberghien.

Since 2010 the Doric Quartet has recorded exclusively for Chandos Records, with their releases covering repertoire ranging from Schumann through to Korngold and Walton as well as works with orchestra, including Elgar's Introduction and Allegro and John Adams' *Absolute Jest*. 2019 saw the release of the Quartet's benchmark recording of the complete Britten String Quartets which gathered glittering reviews across the board. Recorded at Snape Maltings Concert Hall in conjunction with a series of performances at the Britten Weekend celebrations, the disc was Album of the Week in *The Sunday Times*, Editor's Choice in *Gramophone*, and saw the Doric praised in *BBC Music Magazine* for its "extraordinary affinity" with Britten's music. The Quartet's ongoing commitment to Haydn has so far seen them record the complete Op. 20, Op. 76, and Op. 64 Quartets with the recordings attracting acclaim including Editor's Choice in *Gramophone*, Choc du Mois in *Classica Magazine*, and a shortlisting for a Gramophone Award. The next installment in the Quartet's series of Haydn recordings (Op. 33) was released in October 2020, with other future recording plans including quartets by Mozart and Mendelssohn.

Formed in 1998, the Doric String Quartet won first prize at the 2008 Osaka International Chamber Music Competition and second prize at the Premio Paolo Borciani International String Quartet Competition. In 2015 the Quartet was appointed as Teaching Quartet in Association at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and in 2018 the Quartet took over the Artistic Directorship of the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival, a position which sees them play a key role in implementing the Festival's core mission of providing young chamber music professionals with a week of intensive mentoring, coaching, and development.

The Quartet's violist Hélène Clément plays a viola by Guissani from 1843, generously on loan from the Britten-Pears Arts and previously owned by Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten.

Jonathan Biss, Piano

Pianist Jonathan Biss's approach to music is a holistic one. In his own words: *I'm trying to pursue as broad a definition as possible of what it means to be a musician.* As well as being of the world's most sought-after pianists, a regular performer with major orchestras, concert halls, and festivals around the globe and co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music, Jonathan Biss is also a renowned teacher, writer, and musical thinker.



His deep musical curiosity has led him to explore music in a multi-faceted way. Through concerts, teaching, writing, and commissioning, he fully immerses himself in projects close to his heart, including *Late Style*, an exploration of the stylistic changes typical of composers – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Elgar, Gesualdo, Kurtág, Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann – as they approached the end of life, looked at through solo and chamber music performances, masterclasses and a Kindle Single publication *Coda* and *Schumann: Under the Influence*, a 30 concert initiative examining the work of Robert Schumann and the musical influences on him, with a related Kindle publication *A Pianist Under the Influence*.

This 360° approach reaches its zenith with Biss and Beethoven. In 2011, he embarked on a nine-year, nine-disc project to record the complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Starting in September 2019, in the lead-up to the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in December 2020, he commenced a season focused around Beethoven's Piano Sonatas.

Biss is one of the great Beethoven interpreters of our time. His fascination with the composer dates back to his childhood, and Beethoven's music has been a constant throughout his life. In 2011 Biss released *Beethoven's Shadow*, the first Kindle eBook to be written by a classical musician. He has subsequently launched *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*, Coursera's online learning course that has reached more than 150,000 subscribers world-wide; and initiated *Beethoven/5*, a project to commission five piano concertos as companion works for each of Beethoven's piano concertos from composers Timo Andres, Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, Caroline Shaw, and Brett Dean. The latter was premiered in February 2020 with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

As one of the first recipients of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2003, Biss has a long-standing relationship with Mitsuko Uchida, with whom he now enjoys the prestigious position of Co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music. Marlboro holds a special place for Biss, who spent twelve summers there, and for whom nurturing the next generation of musicians is vitally important. Biss continues his teaching as Neubauer Family Chair in Piano Studies at Curtis Institute of Music.

Biss is no stranger to the world's great stages. He has performed with major orchestras across the US and Europe, including New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, CBSO, London Philharmonic Orchestra, and Concertgebouw. He has appeared at the Salzburg and Lucerne Festivals, has made several appearances at Wigmore Hall and Carnegie Hall, and is in demand as a chamber musician.

He was the first American to be named a BBC New Generation Artist, and has been recognized with many other awards including the Leonard Bernstein Award (presented at the 2005 Schleswig-Holstein Festival), Wolf Trap's Shouse Debut Artist Award, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the 2003 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, and the 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award.

Surrounded by music from an early age, Jonathan Biss is the son of violist and violinist Paul Biss and violinist Miriam Fried, and grandson of cellist Raya Garbousova (for whom Samuel Barber composed his cello concerto). He studied with Leon Fleisher at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and gave his New York recital debut at age 20.

www.jonathanbiss.com

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